

# Driving Your Bike

*Put the bicycles on the car rack. Take them off. Put them back on. That's enough exercise.*

By ROGER MUMMERT

**B**EFORE each family road trip, I load up our Ford Explorer with duffel bags, tennis rackets, pillows, seat snacks, bottled water and enough wine, chips and salsa to ease our way through a month of sunsets. Then, before calling the kids to assume their posts, I commit the last official packing act: I hoist a bike rack onto the back of the S.U.V. and strap on our bicycles.

"You're taking the bikes?" my wife, Robin, then asks, pausing with one hand on hip. "Last time we hardly rode them."

"Not the point," I say with an air of 7 a.m. testiness. But naturally, hers is a point well taken. As a family, we have "hardly ridden" our bikes in some of the most picturesque countryside the Northeast has to offer. The fact that we routinely underutilize these two-wheeled articles of exercise in no way discourages me from packing them, each and every trip (save for skiing Vermont in January). It doesn't matter if we ride or not. A heap of intertwined bikes bound up with colorful bungee cords on the back of a car sends a clear signal: We're an exercise family, a bike family. We're goin' for it! We're just doin' it!

I love glancing in the rearview mirror and seeing bike wheels turning slow, happy circles as we glide down the highway. When I spot another family similarly weighted down with a web of bikes on their rear bumper, I give the driver a fist pump. It's an expression of the brotherhood we share, a velo version of a gesture from "Easy Rider."

Once we reach our destination, and after calling bathroom dibs, unloading the bikes is the first order of business. It has to be. Except for roof-borne designs, bike racks render a car inaccessible from the rear, a real traveler's handicap. Finding a place to safely store the bikes in a crowded hotel room is practically impossible. So, once unpacked, I usually put the bike rack back on our car, re-load and lock down the bikes. We thus continue to tote (if not ride) our bikes wherever we go for the rest of our stay.

While in Camden, Me., a few summers back, a young couple with two mountain bikes on their hatchback pulled up beside us at a convenience store. "Been riding?" I inquired, nodding affirmatively, as they got out of their car. The mud on their bikes was

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thick as breaching on fried chicken.

"It was great!" replied the guy, tossing back his ponytail. "There's like hundreds of miles of dirt trails up here."

"We mostly stick to the streets," I said, gesturing to the clean bikes on the back of our Explorer.

"Uh, huh," he replied. Then he strode away in his pedal-gripping bike shoes.

In fairness, we have chugged some miles on family trips, but mostly our riding has been theoretical.

"This would be a lovely place to stop and pedal for a while," I said, as the verdant hills of Vermont flashed by on one springtime journey. "The kids are tired, let them nap," my wife replied.

On family trips, such excuses abound. The Jersey Shore was "too hot." The rolling

farmland of Pennsylvania was "too buggy." The flat roads around Montauk were "too sunny." The hills around Smugglers' Notch, Vt., were "way too steep," even I had to admit to my wife and daughters, now 12 and 15.

But traveling through Massachusetts one summer, we stopped and spent a blissful hour pedaling around the Colonial homes and shady cemeteries of Historic Deerfield. It broke up a long drive, and it felt great to stretch our legs. And this was the only time we rode on the whole trip.

On many a trip when the bikes hardly came off the rack, I found myself taking down my own bike on our last evening and tooling around the parking lot just to be able to later say, "Sure, I rode up in New Hampshire."

Once we do hop astride our bikes, we find

them to be the perfect antidote to crowded vacation areas. Newport swarms with cars and tour buses in the summer, but we zoomed handily from mansion to mansion on two wheels. And we escaped the slow-moving parade of cars on Cape Cod's Route 6 by stowing our rig and pedaling down the Cape Cod Rail Trail, now dedicated to bikes and runners. O.K., so it was raining, and the kids kvetched, but otherwise we spent an athletic morning of riding before heading back to the go-carts, trampolines and clam shacks for which that vacationland is known.

Last summer, I headed out not with my family but by my lonesome to Oklahoma to check out cowboy culture. Naturally, I lashed my bike on my car, with the romantic notion that I would veer off the Interstate

every few hours and pedal around small towns in the American heartland. My best intentions were stymied by temperatures that hovered around 105 degrees, but I did ride early or late each day, and it was great. Pedaling through neighborhood alleyways, dodging wash on the line and scattering lazy dogs offer indelible images that you don't get when clicking off the miles at 70 miles an hour.

My bike, while on the rack, hung low enough to partly obscure my rear New York license plate, which I figured was not a bad thing out West. In Pawnee, Okla., I pulled up to the encampment of a cattle trail drive whose organizers I had arranged to interview.

"I'm the writer, uh, from New York . . ." I began, with a touch of twang that had seeped into my voice.

"Ah noticed," replied a cowboy, gesturing to the license plate on the front of my car. Well, I figured my cover would have been blown just as easily had I backed in, spokes first.

In the middle of our interview, the trail drive folks suggested that we "ride on down" to see the longhorn cattle that they had described and that I hoped to photograph. They were grazing in a pasture a half mile away.

"Have you, uh, got a horse?" asked Ed, one of the drovers, or cattle prodders, on the trail drive.

"Got a bike." I said, with a thumb toward my car.

He pushed back his hat and thought a moment. We decided that a bike might work. As Ed rode his horse down to the pasture, I pedaled alongside on a rough but passable ride over thick, dry grassland. The many bumps animated my voice like a cartoon character's. "Ar-re thee-se cat-tle ev-ver-er mee-ean?" I asked.

"They won't bother you, long as you stay on your horse. I mean . . ." He looked down at me quizzically. This clearly was a first in Pawnee. We drew close to the magnificent animals, which to my eye seemed like historic vestiges from the Chisholm Trail era. One steer, in particular, carried a set of horns broad as the wing span on an eagle. I got off my bike, put a zoom lens on my camera and crept to within 20 feet of the steer. It was then that it turned toward me, snorted and gave me a "You talkin' to me?" look. Then it began to stride toward me.

"It's best to stay mounted," Ed advised in a stern voice. With no further prodding, I hopped back on my bike, and the steer halted. See, I thought, making a note to share with my wife and kids, it's always a good idea to take a bike when you travel. ■